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ABSTRACT

By using public speaking skills, typical classroom problem areas can be reduced or eliminated. During the first five minutes of class, instructors can orient their audience by reviewing information from the previous class, or gain attention with an interesting story, quote, or humorous incident related to the subject matter. To avoid wasting the last five minutes of class, instructors can summarize material, provide closure, and offer motivation. The problem of students who do not take good notes can be reduced by organizing lectures and using headings and outlines to distinguish major areas from supporting points. To avoid having students become confused or frustrated, instructors can analyze their audience at the beginning of the course to determine interests, and use feedback to monitor student progress. Instructors can reduce student boredom and disinterest by using expression, controlling volume and inflection, revealing their enthusiasm for the subject, supplying a variety of stimuli to keep students motivated, and making use of visual aids and other instructional media. To help students who do poorly on quizzes and/or tests, instructors can clearly distinguish major and minor points, use simplified behavioral objectives, and give sample quizzes and tests to relieve test anxiety. Finally, instructors should build a rapport with their students to create a mutual learning environment of trust and respect. (Two footnotes and 20 references are appended.) (MM)

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# USING PUBLIC-SPEAKING SKILLS FOR TEACHING IMPROVEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Excellent teaching transcends the classroom, but often the perception of excellence starts there. In this article we confront seven typical classroom problem areas: wasting the first or last five minutes of class, students who don't take good notes, students becoming confused or frustrated, bored or uninterested, students doing poorly on quizzes and tests, and students who think instructors hate them, put them down, or have no respect for them. The solutions we offer come from our combined teaching of public speaking of over 40 years. By using public speaking skills, most of the problems can be reduced or eliminated. (99 words)

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# USING PUBLIC-SPEAKING SKILLS FOR TEACHING IMPROVEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Many instructors do not have the opportunity to practice their teaching skills until they are thrust into the classroom setting. Training programs are built into other professions to allow for safe practice. Medical students have internships, aircraft pilots have Link trainers, and actors have closely supervised rehearsals (Allen & Ryan, p. 4). Instructors practice on their students gradually, using trial and error to perfect their teaching skills. True, high-school teachers have practice teaching, but this method has been found ineffective by numerous writers (Turney, Cliff, Dunkin, and Traill, 1973, p. 1; Brusling, 1974, p. 18; Fuller, 1969; Gregory, 1972, p. 3; Rickover, 1963; Conant, 1963; Smith, 1969; Silberman, 1970).

In this article, we examine some common classroom teaching problems.1 To these problems we apply public-speaking skills. By using the skills we outline, most of the common problems can be reduced or eliminated. The techniques and methods can be utilized at once and do not require years of experience or special training.

It is true that excellent teaching transcends the classroom; it involves more than simply enthusiasm, preparation, organization, clarity, and being stimulating (Sherman, et. al., 1987). These traits can be demonstrated in the classroom.

Sherman et. al. (1987) suggest it also involves possessing knowledge and experience. But the classroom is a critical environment, and what happens there is crucial to teaching effectiveness. We do not deny the importance of knowledge and experience; but good teaching must deal with important classroom problems as well. The perception of teaching excellence often begins in the classroom.

Problem 1: Instructors waste the first 5 minutes of class.2

Solution 1: Orient the audience. This skill prepares students for learning activities and activates their interest. It can take several directions. Instructors can briefly review information covered in the previous class. Several students can be asked to review material or instructors can simply summarize it. Orienting audiences also can include stating the goals or objectives for the day so students know what will be happening during the next 50 minutes and what may be expected of them. Relating material to students' needs, futures, or personal goals provides a useful starting place as well.

Solution 2: Gain attention. We advise beginning speakers to catch the attention of their listeners at the outset of their speech--and throughout the speech as well. Instructors can use similar methods. An interesting story, a startling statement of fact, a hypothetical illustration, a question or set of questions, an interesting quote, or something humorous related to the subject matter can involve students quickly. Instructors should not

overlook the possibility of stressing the significance and importance of their material as an additional method.

Problem 2: Students do not take good notes.

Solution: Organize lectures. Instructors need to organize their information to facilitate the assimilation of their material. A preview of the main heads to be covered is a useful starting point. Then instructors need to utilize main heads and subheads tied together with transitions and internal summaries. The more signposts that tell students what has happened and what will be happening next, the better. An outline of the lecture is valuable since it is difficult for listeners (whether students or not) to distinguish major areas from supporting points. Patterns are important.

We have found the use of slides valuable for mass lectures. Perhaps our most useful tool is the slide build-up where each successive slide carries just one piece of new information. We give examples while the slides carry the content that is to go into the notes.

Problem 3: Instructors waste the last 5 minutes of class.

Solution 1: Summarize material. This is the process of summing up, bringing information together, refocusing on the main points, or highlighting the main thesis of the lecture or activity.

Instructors can spend the final minutes of class telling students what the most important aspects of that day's lecture or activity were. Students could be asked to sum up those areas they

felt were most important. Different students could be assigned each day. Short summation quizzes can be given or a brief half-sheet response on the day can be requested (Weaver & Cotrell, 1985).

Solution 2: Provide closure. Often, the summary can provide closure; however, it doesn't always do it. The day's activities should come to some crisp, definite end. Listeners should not be left wondering whether or not something more is to come after a pause. Closure can be provided with a final statement, a brief wrap-up, or a short aphorism. In our mass lectures, for example, we have a final slide, always the same color, with a brief, sometimes witty phrase or statement that provides both a summation and motivation.

Solution 3: Offer motivation. Not all lectures lend themselves to a motivated ending; some do. Instructors, when appropriate, may want to give their listeners one final push in the direction they wish them to take. This could even involve offering them some anticipation of the next lecture topic or classroom activity.

Problem 4: Students become confused or frustrated.

Solution 1: Analyze the audience. It is important for instructors to know that their information is geared to the intellectual capabilities of their listeners. It helps, therefore, to know who the listeners are, how old they are, what sex they are, as well as their socio-economic and educational backgrounds. To know their goals, interests, abilities,

limitations, and experiences will make it even more possible that information can be tailored precisely for them.

Several methods exist for acquiring this information. In one course, we ask students to fill out a brief questionnaire that supplies answers to our key questions: Why did you enroll in this course? and What do you expect this course to be like? Our problem is simply that we get students in the course who think it is something that it is not, or think they are going to get something out of it that they are not. To both cut off these false expectations and focus them properly are two of our early goals. Questions can be framed for whatever the situation or need. In other cases, instructors might use a discussion session at the beginning of the semester or individual student conferences.

Solution 2: Use feedback. Effective classroom teaching involves careful monitoring. Instructors need to be aware of their listeners as the class period continues--slowing down as needed, repeating when necessary, or asking questions to solve problems. Questions like, "Does everyone understand?" or "Are you with me?" can help instructors pace their material appropriately. But one thing we have determined is that just because the questions are asked, and just because no one responds, does not necessarily mean that everyone understands and is with the instructor!

One aspect of feedback that people rarely consider is the adjustment process. Part of feedback requires adjusting to what

the monitoring process reveals. That is, instructors need to do what is necessary to bring their material into line. Giving a lecture from manuscript, for example, would make it difficult, if not impossible, for lecturers to adjust their material if they found it too difficult or complex for their listeners.

Solution 3: Apply the material. Confusion and frustration can be handled, too, if instructors can apply their information. Students have to know what the information means to them or can do for them. Too much description (just telling information) tends to be dry and dull. The student questions, "Why should I listen to you?" or "Why should I waste my time here?" may not seem legitimate; but they are questions that are asked. To address them, will help make instructor material more interesting and applicable. Answers can become an integral part of prepared lecture material.

Problem 5: Students are bored and uninterested.

Solution 1: Use expression. Instructors can directly affect boredom and disinterest by moving out from behind the lectern. Adding facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact also may help. Looking directly at listeners causes them to keep awake and alert. Ask yourself, "What do you do with your hands when you lecture?" "Where do you stand?" (Notice, we didn't say sit!) "How much do you move around?" "Do you laugh or smile in class?" "Where do you tend to look when you lecture?" Expression is something instructors have direct control over. Can we expect our students to be any more enthusiastic than we are?

Solution 2: Control volume and inflection. Instructors need to vary their volume and inflection to add variety and interest potential to their material. Effective communicators must project well, avoid a monotone, and use proper voice inflection to set one idea off from others. Skillful use of volume and inflection can reveal instructor enthusiasm. When do you speak louder or softer? When do you speak faster or slower? How do you emphasize your main points?

Solution 3: Reveal enthusiasm. Expression and volume as well as inflection often reveal enthusiasm, but enthusiasm requires individual treatment as well. It is one of the most important factors in excellent teaching (Sherman et. al., 1987, pp. 67-68). In his review of studies about teacher enthusiasm, Rosenshine (1970) discovered support for the following conclusions: "It is related to learning at all levels; it produces gains in comprehension, increases recall, improves attitudes, lessens anxiety, and increases divergent thinking" (Witmer, 1985, p. 171). Obviously, it is an essential factor in classroom teaching.

How can instructors reveal enthusiasm? In their work on the topic, Weaver and Cotrell (1988) mention seven techniques and methods for achieving it. Animation in delivery is first. Using surprise and variety are second and third. Enthusiastic teachers also encourage involvement, know their students, have faith in the system, and are free from burnout. Enthusiasm makes learning exciting, dynamic, and inspiring.

Solution 4: Supply variety. Students need a variety of stimuli to keep them interested and motivated. One of the essential aspects of variety in teaching is trying to break the one-way, traditional, teacher-to-student, information delivery system. Weaver and Cotrell (1986) provide seven steps to increase audience participation in lectures: rhetorical questions, show of hands, direct questions, short surveys, dyads, triads, and small-group work. This helps shift the focus from the lecturer to the students.

Instructors, too, need to vary their information. Examples and illustrations should be used to clarify and expand points. They also tend to secure audience attention--at least momentarily. Statistics, definitions, testimony, analogies, and personal experiences can be injected to add diversity, increase attention, and provide clarification. These also allow students time to digest and percolate information. Information overload can be a problem in the lecture classroom.

An easy technique for adding variety is to intersperse questions throughout the lecture. Questions can serve to check student recall, reinforce and strengthen comprehension, ask for a personal example or insight, challenge students to go beyond the information, highlight test material, provide feedback to the instructor, or generate class discussion. Interspersing questions means that lecturers can plan some of the questions in advance. Good questions--planned or not--arouse interest and motivate inquiry.

The benefits of using questions are numerous. That is especially valuable information considering their ease of use. Information is readily available regarding types of questions and planning good questions (Bloom, 1956; Gall, 1970; Dauterman, 1970). Essentially, they should reflect a definite purpose, be stated concisely, require thoughtful responses, and not be ambiguous.

Gall (1970) offers several useful techniques for asking questions. He suggests asking them to the class first before to a specific person, allowing sufficient time for formulating answers, evenly distributing questions to all members of the class, accepting all answers, and avoiding teacher dominance. Perhaps the most difficult problem instructors face is answering their own questions when there is silence. It might be better to rephrase the question and ask it again, or just pause until a response comes. Instructors should be clear, to the point, and sensitive when they answer questions or in responding to students' answers. If instructors want to use questioning as a regular teaching method, then they need to realize that students want reinforcement and encouragement when they respond. Otherwise the technique is likely to wane in both effectiveness and participation.

Solution 5: Make use of visual aids and other instructional media. Instructors who are able to use a variety of senses, make their material more memorable. When students see and hear, they remember the information longer. When planning classroom lectures, presentations, or activities, instructors need to

consider the variety of aids available. Demonstrations, models, maps, graphs, charts, pictures, use of the chalkboard, handouts, slides, movies, video-, or audiotapes, records, and even people (guest speakers) are worth considering. When using visual or other instructional aids, creativity and imagination play a vital role in sustaining student interest and curiosity.

Problem 6: Students do poorly on quizzes and/or tests.

Solution 1: Distinguish major and minor points. This helps students determine what is important and what is not. Crucial points can be indicated with a comment like "What I'm about to tell you is important," or "This needs to be highlighted (or designated with an asterisk)." Using slides or an overhead projector can visually make these distinctions clear for students. An outline can serve this purpose as well.

Solution 2: Use simplified behavioral objectives. These take the guesswork out of what instructors expect from students. For a unit on listening, for example, behavioral objectives might be phrased: Students will explain why listening is important. Students will list the benefits of active listening. In this way, students will know what the major foci are and can concentrate on the main objectives in their study. In speechmaking, it is important for speakers to clearly indicate what it is they want their listeners to understand, believe, or do.

Solution 3: Give sample quizzes and tests. We have found that giving a sample quiz or several sample test questions in lecture helps relieve test anxiety. A handout with sample

questions does the same. With the burgeoning emphasis on GPA (Grade Point Average) (Stein, Galetto, Harmison, 1986) anything instructors can do to aid students in their study and preparation for tests is welcome and useful.

Problem 7: Students think instructors hate them, put them down, or have no respect for them.

Solution: Create rapport. The most important way to counteract this lack of mutual respect between instructors and students is to reveal accessibility. Kremer (1979) reveals how to encourage students to consult with their instructors. First, instructors should say in class that they are not too busy, and that it is not an inconvenience. We have found that whenever possible, waiting until all class members have left the classroom before leaving encourages students to talk after class. Instructors can suggest that consultations outside of class are part of their responsibility. They can meet students at convenient times--like just before or after class. They can talk in the hallway, on the way to the next class, in the student lounge, or wherever convenient. They can listen to students first, before making suggestions, and they can emphasize reassurance rather than confrontation. Students need to know that having and discussing problems is commonplace and that they see many students. Rapport builds trust and trust begets trust. This helps create a proper, respectful, mutual learning environment where students and instructors learn together.

## Summary

These are not the only problems instructors and students face in the classroom, but they are some of the most common. Wasting time, weak note taking, confusion and frustration, boredom and disinterest, as well as poor test performance rank high among student responses. If we were to summarize the suggestions we have made for instructors to counter, and perhaps, solve, these problems they would be:

1. Orient the audience.
2. Gain attention.
3. Organize lectures.
4. Summarize material.
5. Provide closure.
6. Offer motivation.
7. Analyze the audience.
8. Use feedback.
9. Apply the material.
10. Use expression.
11. Control volume and inflection.
12. Reveal enthusiasm.
13. Supply variety.
14. Make use of visual aids and other instructional media.
15. Distinguish major and minor points.
16. Use simplified behavioral objectives.
17. Give sample quizzes and tests.
18. Create rapport.

These do not represent all public-speaking skills, by any means. They are, however, useful, relevant, and workable skills with respect to the classroom problems posed. Our approach has been suggestive--offering alternative techniques and methods for solving viable, noticeable problems.

There is no doubt that excellent teaching transcends the classroom. It involves more than simply enthusiasm, preparation, organization, clarity, and being stimulating--traits that can be demonstrated in the classroom (Sherman, et. al., 1987), as pointed out previously. It also involves possessing knowledge and experience (Sherman, et. al., 1987). But the classroom is an essential environment and what happens there is crucial to effectiveness in teaching. Our purpose has been to show how public-speaking skills can be used for teaching improvement in the classroom.

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## Footnotes

1 These problems were defined by the University of Massachusetts' "Clinic to Improve University Teaching." Both authors are professors of speech who have taken numerous teacher-improvement courses. Between them, they have more than 40 years of teaching experience.

2 Of the problems defined by the University of Massachusetts' "Clinic to Improve University Teaching," these were the top ones among open-ended student responses when 160 students in an IPCO 306, "Interpersonal Communication," were asked, "What are the most common problems you have encountered in the classroom?" Fall Semester, 1987. Bowling Green State University.